

Do I Need To Get Tested For Hepatitis C?



What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a disease that affects your liver. It is caused by a virus, called the hepatitis C virus or **HCV** for short.

According to government estimates, almost 4 million people in the U.S. have been infected with HCV. Veterans seem to have a higher rate of HCV infection than others.

I don't feel sick. Why should I get tested for HCV?

The symptoms of HCV infection are usually very mild. In fact, you may not have any symptoms at all.

Even though HCV might not make you feel sick, it is still a serious illness. In most cases, if you have HCV, it never goes away. Over time, it can contribute to other problems, including cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) and liver cancer. Finally, because it stays in your body, you can give HCV to someone else.

How can I decide if I am at risk for HCV?

Some people are at greater risk for HCV than others. You might be one of them if:

- You ever used a needle to inject drugs like heroin or cocaine, even if it was many years ago.
- You had a blood transfusion or organ transplant before 1992.
- You received blood products for clotting problems before 1987.
- You were a health care worker and had contact with blood on the job.
- You were on long-term kidney dialysis.
- You shared someone else's razor, toothbrush, or other personal items that might have had blood on them.
- Your mother had HCV when she gave birth to you.
- You had sex with someone who has HCV or have had many sex partners.

In addition, the Veterans Health Administration recommends testing if:

- You are a Vietnam-era veteran.
- You have used cocaine.
- You have had exposure to blood on your skin.
- You wish to be tested.

How can I protect myself from getting HCV?

There are lots of things you can do to keep from getting HCV. The most important is to avoid other people's blood, or things that might have other people's blood on them. For example,

- **Don't inject drugs.** If you do, use a clean needle every time, and never share your needle or works with anyone else. Ask your doctor how you can get off drugs.

- **Practice safer sex.** It's not easy to get HCV in most sexual situations, but it is not impossible. Use a condom (rubber) or dental dam when you have sex, particularly if you have multiple sex partners. Talk with your partner about HCV and other sexually transmitted diseases.
- **If you are a health care worker, observe standard precautions.** Follow routine barrier precautions and handle needles and other sharps safely. Report every needlestick or other on the job injury.
- **Don't share personal items that might have blood on them,** such as razors, toothbrushes, or personal medical supplies.
- **Talk with your doctor about HCV.** Your doctor can tell you some other ways to keep from getting HCV based on your specific situation.

What are some ways in which HCV is NOT spread?

HCV is mainly spread through the blood. You can't get HCV from:

- Holding someone's hand
- Hugging or kissing someone
- Being coughed or sneezed on
- Sharing eating utensils or food
- Eating dirty food or drinking dirty water (although this may give you other diseases)
- Donating blood

What is the test for HCV? Is it complicated?

The test to see if you have ever been exposed to HCV is very simple, and shouldn't take more than a few minutes. Your doctor will take a small sample of your blood and send it to the laboratory. You can find out the results in one or two weeks.

If I find out I'm not infected, can I get a vaccine?

No. There are no vaccines (shots) that will keep you from getting HCV. There *are* vaccines that can keep you from getting other kinds of hepatitis. Ask your doctor for more information.

How can I get tested?

Any veteran who wants a test for HCV can get one, just by making an appointment. Call your local VA Medical Center for more information.

For more information and support call

- Your local VA Health Care facility and the Veterans Affairs hepatitis C web site (Internet address: <http://www.va.gov/hepatitis>)
- The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) Hepatitis Toll-Free Information Line (1-888-4-HEPCDC) and web site (Internet address: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis>)
- The American Liver Foundation
1-888-4HEP USA or 1-800-GO LIVER.
Internet address: <http://www.liverfoundation.org>

